
Elisabetta JEŽEC, *The Lexicon. An Introduction*

Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics, 2016, 234 pages

Cathy Parc



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/3529>

DOI: 10.4000/lexis.3529

ISSN: 1951-6215

Publisher

Université Jean Moulin - Lyon 3

Electronic reference

Cathy Parc, « Elisabetta JEŽEC, *The Lexicon. An Introduction* », *Lexis* [Online], Book reviews, Online since 25 August 2019, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/3529> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/lexis.3529>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.



Lexis is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Elisabetta JEŽEC, *The Lexicon. An Introduction*

Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics, 2016, 234 pages

Cathy Parc

REFERENCES

Elisabetta Ježec

The Lexicon. An Introduction. Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics, Oxford University Press, London, 2016. ISBN : 978-0-19-960154-7, Price : £20.99, 234 pages

1. General observations

- 1 Elisabetta Ježec is Associate Professor of Linguistics in the Department of Humanities at the University of Pavia. She has published articles in specialized journals like *Linguistical Investigationes* [2004], *Folia Linguistica* [2009] and *Lexis* [2010]. *The Lexicon An Introduction* was first written in Italian and published by Il Mulino in 2005 under the title *Lessico. Classi di parole, strutture, combinazioni*. The English revised translation was released by Oxford University Press in 2016, when the title was made to sound more general and less technical, probably to appeal to a larger readership. The phrase “An Introduction” emphasizes the author’s aim, which is to specify the main theoretical notions the reader will come to use if he or she studies the lexicon as a specialist or simply to further his or her knowledge of it:

This volume does not aim to present a theory of the lexicon from the point of view of its mental organization (i.e. the lexicon as it is stored and processed in our minds), nor does it aim to examine the way in which the lexical competence of speakers develops through time in language learning. More basically, its goal is to provide a description of the main properties of words and the organizational principles of the lexicon that can be derived by examining the use we make of words on a daily basis; it introduces the categories that are useful to classify the

various phenomena that can be observed by querying digitalized corpora and gathering speakers' judgments, and proposes viable representations for each of them, using the formalisms developed in the field of general and theoretical linguistics. (p. viii)

- 2 The keywords “word classes”, “combinations”, “structures”, “lexical knowledge”, “distribution”, “ambiguity” and “concept”, which appear in different fonts and sizes in the second part of the Italian title have now been traced in filigree in the background of the red front cover contrasting with the title in white letters. The outside back cover features part of those phrases on the left together with the word “context” while a brief presentation of the book and of its author are to be found on the right. Other works belonging to the same series, ‘Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics’, come in other colours but with the same layout and deal with topics pertaining to linguistic domains such as morphology, phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, natural language syntax, diachronic syntax, cognitive grammar, and functional discourse grammar.

2. Linguistic framework

- 3 The approach chosen, which relies on both semantics and syntax since these two fields should be considered to be working together towards the building up of meaning, combines theory and practice as the description of the “structural organization” of the lexicon implies analyzing the “behavior” of the latter “in actual use” (p. viii). In so doing, one of the difficulties the linguist is confronted with is precisely that “phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax and pragmatics” (p. vii) have to be taken into account simultaneously since there are inevitably interactions among them, which contribute to defining our sense of the world:

Words, in the end, are a direct mirror of how we conceptualize the world and our experience of it. (p. viii).

- 4 Even if Elisabetta Ježec points out that in language acquisition chronologically words come first and syntax second, she underlines the fact that her outlook is not that of a didactician who would favour a diachronic picture of the development of human communication skills nor that of a neurologist who would ponder over the mental processes at work when we use words. Her purpose being mainly practical, she focuses on “digitalized corpora” (p. ix) such as those provided by The British National Corpus to which she applies the precepts of Formalism and Structuralism as she writes page ix in her “Preface to the English edition”. The examples, sometimes borrowed from the books of other linguists, are taken from a wide variety of languages like English, French, Italian, Latin, Dutch, Norwegian, German and Frisian, but also North and Central American ones, Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, Turkish, Arabic and Samoan. It is thus easier for the author to highlight similarities and differences among them and show you how close or remote some Indo-European languages or others can be.

3. Synopsis of the six chapters

- 5 The great asset of the book is not only the historical point of view which enables you to keep in mind the linguistic panorama while zooming in on items which have been matters of debate for decades or centuries, but also the way you are invited to proceed from a minimalist definition of the “lexicon of a language” as “the set of its words”

(p. viii) to a progressively more precise and complex one. This leads you to take in a more detailed landscape as the “two parts” of the book (p. ix) which are made up of three chapters each add constitutive elements finally merging into a whole without in any way resembling the building blocks of a doctrine. This postulate of objectivity lets readers form their own opinions all along Chapter 1, which provides them with “Basic notions” for 40 pages or Chapter 2, which deals with “Lexical information” for 12 pages before Chapter 3 tackles “The meaning of words” for 44 pages. From the discussion of what a word is, that is to say the outcome of various processes of lexicalization and useful classifying across languages (Chapter 1), your attention thus shifts more exclusively to semantics as you are shown how your use of the lexicon partakes of your ability to interpret utterances correctly and differs from the way an encyclopedia draws up lists of meanings for each entry (Chapter 2). This contextual angle is logically sharpened by the analysis of the manner in which a succession of words ends up creating a sentence, whose meaning you have to build by applying syntactic rules (Chapter 3) so that it becomes clearer and clearer that the study of words is naturally multi-layered. Hence, the second part is devoted to the perusal of what happens at a higher level of construction, i.e. structures “that can be identified in the global lexicon” (p. ix). Consequently, in Chapter 4, you will learn more about word classes, especially nouns and verbs, as they have been defined in several theories either through their valency, their *Aktionsart*, or the type of entity they instantiate. The “main systems of word classes” (p. ix) are examined before Chapter 5 broaches the topic of paradigmatic relations and Chapter 6 lastly addresses the problems inherent in word combinations.

4. Detailed presentation of each chapter

- 6 One of the upsides of the introductory chapter lies in the neat distinctions which are established between definitions of “the lexicon”, “the dictionary”, “a thesaurus” and “vocabulary” on the one hand, “lexicology” and “lexicography” whether it be “traditional” or “computational”, on the other. Starting from there, you are reminded that form and content, the two dimensions of language, are associated in the process called “lexicalization”, whose end result is each time a word and which is sometimes referred to as “univerbation” or “lexification” (p. 6) depending on how wide or narrow the specialist’s interpretation is. While pointing out the relation between words and concepts, the author naturally draws your eye to the different kinds of lexicalization – either “synthetic” or “analytic”, “descriptive” or “labeling” (p. 8-10) – at work in a given language. By being prompted to understand the structure of the lexicon from a fresh perspective, you will then realize why the traditional definition of a word is insufficient and why it is essential to distinguish different types of words and of meanings – i.e. lexical and grammatical – which will call for the clarification of conventional categories. That is why Elisabetta Ježec revisits the traditional clear-cut distinctions between “functional” and “substantive (i.e. autonomous) meanings” (p. 21) and prefers to speak of “a tendency” instead because we usually take for granted what is in fact difficult to define: “What counts as word?”, “What form represents the word?”. To prove her point, she goes on to set a contrast between “lemma” and “lexeme” (p. 22-23) and studies the case of compounds, of “multi-word lexical units” (p. 24) and of “idioms or idiomatic expressions” (p. 24), which leads her to devise interesting tests for “wordhood” (p. 25-28). When determining the various word types, she dissects the internal structure of a word, the latter being a “simple”, “complex” or

“phrasal” word (p. 30), before she has a look at different types of compounds and finally, of languages: the isolating, polysynthetic, agglutinating, fusional or introflexive ones (p. 35-39). As a result, when you have reached the end of Chapter 1, you are aware of what the author believes are fundamental issues related to the lexicon, to meaning, and to “the notion word”.

- 7 You are then ready to start Chapter 2, which is quite short as it spans pages 41 to 53, and could perhaps have been dealt with in Chapter 1 after section 1.3, entitled “Lexical meaning and grammatical meaning”. Its theme, “Lexical information”, first presupposes the conventional differentiation between denotative and connotative meaning and the taking into consideration of pragmatic meaning. What is likely to arouse your curiosity are the paragraphs devoted to “collocational meaning” (p. 43-45), i.e. “the meaning that a word acquires only in combination (in collocation) with a particular word or set of words” (p. 43-44), and to “categorical flexibility”, i.e. the ability of a word to belong to several categories, for instance to those of nouns and verbs. Some words which function as predicates have the additional property of implying an “argument structure” – “the ability to predicate properties of entities or relations between entities” (p. 49) –, and of determining a specific “*Aktionsart*, (*German for “kind of action”*)”, actionality or lexical aspect (p. 49) which will offer you an insight into the temporality of an event. The concluding lines on the difference between “lexical information” and “encyclopedic knowledge” (p. 50), around which there is no consensus among linguists, enable the author to suggest a more precise definition of the lexicon from the point of view shared by specialists in cognitive semantics and pragmatics. They believe it ought to be “interpreted as the access node into the vast repository of information associated with conceptual categories” (p. 53) while “lexical knowledge” is, according to them, supposed to be “the set of overlapping knowledge associated with lexical items language users converge on” (p. 53).
- 8 The forty-four pages of Chapter 3 will be of special interest to those who are keen on learning more about ambiguity, including those situations in which it stems from homonymy or polysemy, not to be confused with “vagueness” or to be conceived of without a close attention to the context, be it syntactic, semantic or extra-linguistic. Interestingly, polysemy patterns, i.e. “systematic alternations of meaning that apply to classes of words instead of single words” (p. 58), have been detailed by researchers for some time so that “regular polysemy” can now be seen as differing from “inherent polysemy [...] that allows the senses [of a word] to be activated simultaneously” (p. 59). The mention of links between metonymy and nouns, between metaphor and verbs, precedes the disquisition on five “theories on the nature of meaning”: the referential one, favoured by British Cambridge analytical philosophers as well as by some American specialists, the mentalist or conceptual one, the structural one, the prototypical one, and the distributional one. This allows you to draw your own conclusions given that, according to Elisabetta Ježec, they “represent different attempts to capture distinct facets of the same, many-sided phenomenon, [meaning]” (p. 75). Ambiguity and flexibility entail variations in meaning due to combinations, which is why a reminder of the traditional view based on “sense enumeration models” (p. 76) is followed by the presentation of “dynamic approaches to lexical meaning” (p. 77) around two main theories either focusing on “core meaning” or on “the meaning potential”. Yet, they inevitably drive you to understand that “compositionality” is one principle among others which comes into play when words

combine so that instead of an addition, one had better think of interactions, sometimes requiring “mutual adjustment in context” (p. 81). The end of the chapter is somewhat more technical as three “systems of word meaning representation” hinging on “lexical decomposition, meaning postulates and word spaces” (p. 86) are explained. These sections nevertheless raise awareness about some of the problems related to certain formalisms, thus contributing to enlivening the discussion about such topics.

- 9 In Chapter 4, the emphasis being all along its sixty-one pages on “The global structure of the lexicon”, the different word classes and subclasses are reviewed and the “Relationships between word classes and meaning” (p. 98), analyzed from a diachronic standpoint. The theories of several linguists like J. Lyons and T. Givón are quoted before transitivity and intransitivity are referred to in the case of verbs, while the grammar organized around valency structure and thematic roles is set in perspective with the traditional approach and with the generative one. A parallel is drawn between “valency and argument structure” and the “*semantic frame*” proposed by C. J. Fillmore or the “(semantic) pattern” proposed by P. Hanks among others (p. 119). More prominence is then given to *Aktionsart*, which was introduced in Chapter 2 since according to Elisabetta Ježek, it is “inextricably linked” (p. 125) to valency structure. The definitions of “entity nouns” and of “event nouns” (p. 130-137), whose labels may differ from one theory to the next, allow for tests aiming at telling the former from the latter with a view to making clearer the process of nominalization as well as the similarities and dissimilarities that can exist between nouns and verbs. To conclude, the author presents cross-linguistic comparisons especially those suggested by K. Hengeveld, to show how different “word class systems” can be, and why the syntactic criterion appears to be the most appropriate to identify “differentiated”, “flexible” or “rigid” systems (p. 154-157).
- 10 The twenty-six pages of Chapter 5 mostly revolve around what happens on the paradigmatic axis when we choose certain words in preference to others. The linguistic relations that occur are seen through the spectrum of inclusion (hyperonymy/hyponymy, meronymy/holonymy), of identity (synonymy, near-synonymy) and of opposition (antonymy, complementarity, converse terms), three criteria which are exemplified by standard tests and whose traditional definitions are revisited to be made more accurate. The relations of cause, purpose and temporal entailment have to be dealt with separately because the author does not consider them to be “strictly paradigmatic” (p. 180) though they do partake of “the most typical lexical configurations” (p. 182). The highlight is that not only words but also word classes are projected into each of these situations so that you get a better idea of their “relation profile[s]” (p. 182) prior to Chapter 6. Centred on the syntagmatic relations of role, attribution and manner as well as on the issue of word combination, it makes stimulating reading as restrictions inevitably apply. Elisabetta Ježek tries to improve the definition of “collocations” (p. 199-203), which she is keen on discriminating from “lexical semantic solidarities” (p. 201) before adding a paragraph on idiomatic expressions. This enables her to conclude on “the impact of combinatory phenomena on the lexicon” (p. 210) and to go over some of the other definitions given in the previous chapters, especially that of “complex words”. Indeed, it lends itself to further tests so that “word combinations” have to be apprehended according to their “syntactic rigidity” and lexical variability for us to be able to predict meaning.

5. Remarks

- 11 The list of errata you will come across is very short: “during time” (p. xii) has been used instead of “with time”, “perspective” (p. xiii) instead of “perspective”, “a speaker [...] her language” (p. 9) instead of “a speaker [...] their language / his or her language”, “A second test [...] consists of modifying...” (p. 27) instead of “A second test [...] consists in modifying”, “connecting a subject with his predicate” (p. 116) instead of “connecting a subject with its predicate”, “in (25a)” (p. 151) instead of “in (25b)”, “undetached as the cap of a pen” (p. 168) instead of “unattached as the cap of a pen”, and “other categories of opposite” (p. 179) instead of “other categories of opposites”.
- 12 The use of square brackets for phonetic representation instead of the conventional slashes is uncommon pages xii, 44 and 45, as is the transcription [i] for /I/ in quotes such as: “[geim]”, “the complex sound [ei]”, “the simple sound [i] of *guitar*”, and “the sound [i:]” (p. 44-45).
- 13 The analysis of the phrase “Take a train. (‘travel with’)” (p. 78) is debatable: would not one employ “by” rather than “with”, which implies the idea of being accompanied and not the means of transport itself?
- 14 The claim that “[T]he reason *long* behaves differently with *film* and *dress* remains unclear in the theory” (p. 81) may sound somewhat surprising as a film is meant to be watched, which entails a certain duration, whereas a dress is supposed to be worn by someone and thus to be a certain size. One might also discuss the assertion that in English intransitive verbs do not allow passivization to take place:
transitive verbs may be passivized (“the roof was fixed by John” or simply “the roof was fixed”), while intransitive ones cannot (*the gift was arrived). (p. 108)
- 15 In fact, there are exceptions because some intransitive verbs followed by an adverbial can be found in the passive voice: “Nobody had slept in the bed” becomes “The bed had not been slept in” since the adverbial is in a way dealt with as if it were a complement of the verb in the active voice. The same goes for verbs like “sit on (a chair etc.)”, or “live in (a house etc.)”, for example.
- 16 The reader might not agree with the following sentence either:
the verb *cut* entails an animate, intentional, unaffected subject (p. 119)
- 17 because we have to take into account the exceptional case when it is followed by a reflexive pronoun or a possessive determiner plus a noun defining a body part, as in “He cut himself.” or “He cut his finger.”, where the subject is usually unintentional but affected.
- 18 As far as the assertion ““The chair I spoke with yesterday” or “I bought two pounds of courage” are abnormal” (p. 189) is concerned, one might add the exception “an ounce of courage”, where weight is referred to metaphorically and where the meaning is figurative, as in “an ounce of truth / humanity / intelligence / sense”, which are usual lexical entities attested in dictionaries.

6. Strong points

- 19 What any reader cannot fail to appreciate though, whether they be a layperson or a specialist, is the clarity of the lines of reasoning, which are all the easier to follow as

main didactic tools are provided besides the lucid definitions given to words in bold type. Headings and subheadings have been respectively printed in capital letters in the header-block on each left and right page. A brief plan of numbered parts and subparts spreads across two columns just below the heading also in bold characters, which is topped by the Arabic figure corresponding to each chapter. Every synopsis appears in a few single introductory sentences while stimulating suggestions for “Further reading” are made at the end of each of the six main demonstrations. Thus, the reader does not have to refer to the final eleven-page list of “References” to know which article, book or website would be of special interest to them on a given topic, and all the more so because the author details each piece of research there in a few words instead of just mentioning a list of works. Even if the six-page index does not include the names of the authors quoted in the book, it will prove useful.

- 20 Furthermore, figures featuring arrows, square brackets, rectangles and other geometrical shapes, have been included in the text together with tables summing up categories of words, types of entities or of languages, thematic roles and *Aktionsart* properties. They are meant to synthesize key definitions and stamp them the reader’s visual memory, which is a more immediate way of conveying knowledge. References to further sections or chapters are also supposed to help the reader steer his or her way across provisional conclusions although what he or she might find somewhat disorientating are the white or grey boxes to which the author resorts. Elisabetta Ježec does so less to recapitulate the main arguments from a linguistic point of view, as is usually the case with this kind of didactic tool, than to give the reader further information (p. 9), to mention what has been left aside (p. 30) or to analyze exceptions and expand on examples (p. 45), for instance. As a consequence, maybe because of the editor’s choice of format, these boxes seem to replace the footnotes or endnotes you will not find in this book, an absence the reader might regret even if you quickly pick up the habit of attributing one of the above roles to each of these hermeneutic implements. On the whole, *The Lexicon. An Introduction* is a really interesting work in a field which has undergone radical changes in the past few years and cannot fail to attract an increasingly higher number of researchers, who now have new methods at their disposal:

At present, we are witnessing a revolution not so much in the methodology but in the techniques and technology that can be used to perform lexical analysis. Distributional semantics, the major trend nowadays in lexical studies, represents a pole of attraction for many scholars dealing with lexical data. [...] An emerging need in the field of semantics is the effort to combine two traditions of study, namely formal semantics focused on function words and aspects such as quantification and lexical inference, and distributional semantics, focusing on content words and similarities among them, to arrive at lexical representations which are both empirically grounded and theoretically informed. (p. 216)

AUTHOR

CATHY PARC

Cathy Parc, ICP, France.

Senior Lecturer in English at ICP, in charge of the English section at the Pôle Langues, Cathy Parc has a Ph.D. in English Studies from the Sorbonne-Université Paris IV. She passed the “agrégation” in English with a major in Linguistics. She is the author of *Calvin et Hobbes de Bill Watterson La philosophie du quotidien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013, ISBN 978-2-343-00054-1, 132 pages), a French translation of Elizabeth Jennings's *Collected Poems 1953-1985* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014, ISBN 978-2-343-04434-7, EAN 9782343044347, 640 pages), *L'anglais du monde politique* (Paris: Technip et Ophrys Éditions, Collection anglais de spécialité, 2014, ISBN 978-2-7080-1401-5, ISBN 978-2-7080-1402-2, Vol. 1: 280 pages, Vol. 2: 224 pages), and *English Words for Economics Vocabulaire anglais contemporain de l'économie* (Paris: Éditions Ellipses, 2015, ISBN 9782340-008373, 384 pages). She has published articles on literature and linguistics.